Speech on behalf of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) to the IAEA Ministerial Conference on Nuclear Safety, 20-24 June 2011, Vienna, Austria

delivered by Wolfgang Weiss
Chair of the Committee (fifty-eighth and fifty-ninth sessions)

President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The majority of the statements made so far dealt with the safety and security of nuclear installations to minimize the risks of accidental situations with offsite consequences in the future. This statement of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) focuses on the assessment of radiation exposures to populations inside and outside of Japan resulting from the nuclear accident of March 2011.

UNSCEAR is a Committee of world-renowned scientists from 21 Member States designated by the General Assembly of the United Nations to conduct regular evaluations of the levels of exposure from all sources of ionizing radiation and the associated health and environmental effects. Its secretariat is provided by the United Nations Environment Programme.

The Committee's findings include the identification of emerging trends and issues that can prompt policy action. For example, its findings on the follow-up of the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and of studies of other exposed populations allow risk factors for cancer and other effects to be derived. These are used by national governments and the international organizations in developing international standards for radiation protection as part of the Global Nuclear and Radiation Safety regime. The IAEA General Conference has urged its secretariat to continue to use the estimates of UNSCEAR for the development of the safety standards. This is a right separation of functions. I firmly believe it important to separate independent interpretation of the data by highly qualified scientists from the ethical and political debate on protection and policy. Nevertheless I consider that the interaction between science and standard-setting warrants strengthening in any discussions on the future of the Safety Regime.

The Scientific Committee has conducted major scientific evaluations on the radiological consequences of the Chernobyl accident, issued in 1988, 2000 and 2008. In addition it has synthesized the radiological impact of all reported radiation accidents since the 1950s. Its independent assessments remain important authoritative scientific references on these subjects. Those international organizations performing activities related to the Fukushima accident might benefit from the successful experience of the Committee and from its reports assessing the levels of exposure and effects attributable to the Chernobyl accident.

At its fifty-eighth session in May 2011, the Scientific Committee considered the implications of the nuclear power plant accident of March 2011, as far as radiation levels and effects were concerned. The Committee expressed its sympathy and solidarity to the Japanese people and wishes for a prompt recovery from the aftermath of these devastating natural events. It also conveyed to the Japanese scientists that were currently assessing the radiation consequences its availability to support their efforts. The Committee has extensive experience in the appropriate scientific methodologies for exposure assessment of accidental releases. It has

recently published reports on the current scientific knowledge of radiation-related heath effects (including those at low doses and dose rates). These could serve as a basis for assessment of the radiation levels and effects attributable to the accident.

The Committee recognized that the emergency situation in Japan was still in progress and thus a Committee report based on current information and possible effects attributable to the accident would be incomplete. In addition, there was a vast amount of environmental data that had been and would continue to be collected. It is likely that the data from the accident would take many months to analyse. Notwithstanding this, the Committee recommended to start with the compilation of all relevant data and information as soon as possible.

The Committee decided to carry out, once sufficient information was available, a full assessment of the levels of exposure and radiation risks attributable to the accident. It envisages a preliminary document for consideration at its fifty-ninth session in May of 2012 and a more complete report for the sixtieth session of the Committee in 2013. It would be likely that another more complete and definitive report would be needed several years after the accident had ended. I am convening a preliminary planning meeting for conducting the assessment next week.

Provision of quality-assured data will be important in the context of conducting the UNSCEAR evaluation, and I kindly request the active cooperation of all organizations within the UN family, in particular the IAEA, the CTBTO, the WMO, and the WHO in this matter, particularly regarding the monitoring results and the assessment methodologies of their own which will provide significant input in characterizing the situation in Japan, the Pacific Ocean, and world wide.

The Chernobyl experience tells us to expect public distress and anxiety, and concerns about the long-term implications of the accident. I believe that the work of UNSCEAR will be very important to provide an independent authoritative assessment of the long-term implications of radiation exposure from the radionuclides in the environment. I also believe that UNSCEAR can contribute much to providing better background information to help improve understanding of the public and decision-makers about radiation and its effects.

Despite the large death toll and environmental impact of the earthquakes and tsunami themselves, I am pleased that the evacuation and protective measures invoked in response to the accident has reduced the potential exposures of the public. Nevertheless, the effects of long-lived radioactive material in the environment will likely continue to be of concern long after the physical recovery from the tsunami is complete. It will be important for the global community to respond in a coordinated and thoughtful manner in coming years.

Thank you.